EXAMINING PUBLIC OPEN SPACE IN THE HIGH-DENSITY CITY
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An exhibition poster for the Hong Kong exhibit featuring the puzzle-block game design created by the authors.
Project Details

Author
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Title
Examining public open space in the high-density city: Interstitial Hong Kong

Output
Public Exhibitions & Interactive Workshops

Function
Case Study Research

Location
Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hong Kong

Exhibition Title
Interstitial Hong Kong: Exploring the small and marginal spaces of high density urbanism

Venue
gallery SH, SSC, Shanghai
The Borderless Wall, Fei Art Museum, Guangzhou
PMQ Gallery s512, PMQ, Hong Kong

Dates of installation
2017, 2018
The Guangzhou exhibition was integrated into a locally significant architectural work. Research documents, maps and text were displayed in each of the many windows of the art piece.
Summary of the Work and Its Significance, Originality, and Rigor

Interstitial Hong Kong (IHK) is a project to document the smallest and most under-appreciated part of the public realm in Hong Kong. Known as Sitting-out Areas (SOAs) and Rest Gardens (RGs) these spaces exist throughout Hong Kong in the interstices of the city’s physical urban fabric. These spaces form a distinct typology of small scale public realm in the city, and are here for the first time studied in a categorical way based on their impact on public life, community, and ecology. Original categories were created to explain the strategic approaches taken to context and use that were discovered through the drawing and analysis. The work documents an
urban anomaly and anticipates ways in which these spaces might be leveraged to make tactical improvements to the urban public realm. The major output of the work took place in three sequential exhibitions in Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Guangzhou, with further dissemination of the underlying research in journal and conference papers. Furthermore, a series of original drawings and models was produced to disseminate the results of the research project. The research project has been selected for a Commendation by the 2019 RIBA President’s Award for Research.

The exhibitions provided an exchange of resources concerning the public realm in Hong Kong and raised a discourse on its alteration and development through government policies and public interaction. The exhibition informed a
multidisciplinary discussion on design and planning in Hong Kong. The exhibition contributed to a larger public debate on the form, function, distribution and accessibility of public space in high-density cities and sought opportunities by which this typology might counteract the general erosion of public-ness in the contemporary city.
For all SOAs and RGs, we analysed size ranges to show the non-conformance to requirements stated in the government's open space guidelines.

All 500 open spaces, many of which are not included in the public databases or online map resources, were collected in a single map atlas, and distributions analysed to determine coverage.
What's in your Sitting-out Area?
你的休憩處是怎樣的？

With red elements, you can make...

...a shelter or ayclic panel...一個遮蔭棚
...a wall...一堵圍籬

With pink elements, you can make...

...chairs and tables...椅子和枱
...planters or flower pots...花盆或花壇
...sashes or stands...掛飾或台架

With green elements, you can make...

...some shrubs...一些灌木
...some trees...一些樹木
...green walls or climbers...綠色圍籬或攀緣植物

With yellow elements, you can make...

...the pole of a street light...街燈柱
...the pillar of a canopy...遮篷柱
...the backrest of a bench...長凳靠背
1 The puzzle-block game design is explained with a series of postcards available on site that initiated a set of design responses from the public.

2 Photographs from the PMQ exhibit showing the graphic and interactive part of the exhibition.
Originality

Hong Kong’s network of open space has been assembled over a period of rapid urban transformation and geopolitical and socioeconomic change. Scholars have described Hong Kong’s big parks, greenbelts, urban forest, and nature reserves in relation to this history. Our research attempts to examine this story of urbanization through an analysis of the smallest artefacts in this open space network, where each site is a concise response to the varied forces of urbanization. Sitting-out Areas and Rest Gardens reveal the imperfections and exceptions to a maximally monetized and utilized ground.

The research focused on an analysis of open space through a study of the park-object rather than the park-network. Where park-network studies raise critiques at the level of planning, access and open space allocation, the park-object study raised questions of an architectural nature concerning context, geometry, and narrative. Our approach allowed
a design critique where one currently does not exist. Through a series of formal studies, we analysed the suitability of these urban interventions to site and to the community of users. One of the exhibits also developed a game-play in which children and adults were engaged in discussions of space in the city then invited to construct small models articulating their own desires for open space form and function. These results were collected as an alternative to the procedural results of space making at use by the government today.

The components of the exhibitions are photographs, detailed axonometric drawings, cartographic studies and physical models. The axonometric drawings in particular illustrate the unique results of the design practices common for these projects. They reveal the planned and unplanned results of these strategies as they intersect with the complexities of site and variations in use. Photographic essays compliment the findings demonstrated in the drawings and maps.
Research Questions

• What are the internal logics of open-space production in a high-density city?
• To what extent does design function at the smallest scale of public realm?
• How are small open spaces used as part of the city’s mix of open space types?
• Can small open space typology be redefined to allow for greater variety and better fit to site and community?
Each SOA was modelled digitally to understand the spatial makeup and 3-dimensional fit into the surrounding context.

Stills from the exhibition showing case study illustrations and analytical text.
Rigor

The project was an opportunity to develop the community’s awareness of an overlooked aspect of the high-density urban fabric and to document the complexities of form and impact that arise from a particular outcome of the city’s planning and open space guidelines.

• More than 500 SOA sites were located within government databases and a sample of 105 were visited, photographed, and documented in plan and section. Digital models were made of major features within each site.

• A set of 6 categories was developed based on a survey of surrounding land use, topography, and infrastructural impacts. Site usage was also surveyed. Sites were assigned a category based on
these contextual situations.

- Interviews were conducted with members of district and city-level planning and architectural units responsible for implementation and maintenance of these spaces to understand otherwise undocumented site allocation and design procedures.
- Archival research was undertaken to understand the transformation of the guiding principles and planning requirements for these small public open spaces over time.
Images of exhibition in Shanghai at architecture SH gallery. This version of the exhibit was shown in a teaching facility, so the exhibit featured much of the pedagogical contents of the research, including the role of the case study in urban analysis.
Significance

Though the spaces documented in this research project are ubiquitous in the city, they have rarely been studied in a categorical way in terms of their impact on public life, community, or the greater urban environment. Through illustrated surveys, field documentation, design exploration, and public engagement, the research develops a critical spatial analysis of small landscape spaces in Hong Kong and reveals an exceptional opportunity to transform the city’s public realm through a focus on its smallest, most overlooked spaces. Because of the government’s process of site allocation and design contracting, these spaces are rarely investigated.
critically in the planning and landscape design disciplines—they exist as an afterthought.

In this way, the research significance has much in common with other typological studies of urban objects within the urban design, architecture, and landscape architectural disciplines, especially within the Asian urban context. Studies such as Atelier BowWow’s *Made in Tokyo*, Jonathan Solomon’s *Cities Without Ground*; and Aaron Tan’s work on the *Kowloon Walled City*. In these cases (as in ours), the non-designed but critical spaces of the city are examined in a serious way so that they can inform design and planning disciplines.
Images from version on display at the PMQ Gallery in Hong Kong. The exhibition emphasized community participation and input, and featured models that formed the basis of a game play feature.
Images from opening of version on display for Fei Arts Museum in Guangzhou. The exhibition was planned to form a dialogue with the architecture on the nature of open space and domesticity.
Dissemination and
Evidence of Peer Review

This project has been selected for a Commendation by the 2019 RIBA President’s Award for Research. (Confidential)

The project was disseminated within a public realm. Exhibit openings and discussions were held at each of the three exhibitions, and were aimed at a body of professionals and academics in the field. The version of the exhibition held in Guangzhou was curated by a well-regarded art institution (the Fei Museum) and was reviewed in local press (see appendix).

In addition to exhibitions, the research appeared in conference papers, talks, and journal article

(1) The research was published by the authors in 2017 as journal article: “Interstitial Hong Kong” in Landscape
Architecture Frontiers 5 (3)*. LAF is a bimonthly journal co-published by Higher Education Press and Peking University and edited by College of Architecture and Landscape Architecture of Peking University. Professor Yu Kongjian is the Editor-in-Chief.

(2) The project was shared in a paper “From Miniature to Synchronizer: An ontology of small urban spaces in Hong Kong” delivered at the 2018 Great Asian Street Symposium in Singapore.

(3) In Hong Kong, we were invited by the Civic Exchange to lecture on our findings to professionals, academics, and student groups.

(4) The research work was documented in the exhibition, Sparkle! Journal of a City Foot Soldier, curated by Sara Wong at Hong Kong’s Oi! Gallery.
間隙香港
exploring the small and marginal landscapes of high density urbanism

29 OCT 2017 - 5 JAN 2018
Exhibition

Opening Reception | VIP Preview

Ivan Valin, Xiaoxuan Lu, Susanne Trumal
featuring work from the introductory MLA design studio 2016-17

Division of Landscape Architecture
Faculty of Architecture
The University of Hong Kong
INTERSTITIAL HONG KONG: exploring the small and marginal landscapes of high density urbanism

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Original posters for the exhibits in Shanghai (L) and Guangzhou (R)
Appendix

Related publications by the designer:


Books, journals, and references to the project written by others:

Sparkle! Journal of a City Foot Soldier (2018). by Sara Wong at Hong Kong’s Oi!, LCSD, Hong Kong
Press

信息时报-艺术周刊(Art Weekly / Information Times)
[See attached 20180729_艺术周刊.jpg]

羊城晚报 (Yangcheng Evening News)
[See attached 20180803_羊城晚报.jpg]

新浪新闻

http://www.sohu.com/a/242542484_816901
搜狐新闻

腾讯快报

https://art.icity.ly/events/kw59c40
每日环球展览

https://news.artron.net/20180721/n1012398.html
雅昌快讯

https://www.douban.com/event/29594408/
豆瓣同城

https://art.icity.ly/events/ra6kjbz
每日环球展览

http://www.shanghaiwow.com/event/detail/id/2881
上海沃会
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Coorey, S. B. A. (2007). Design of open spaces in high density zones: case study of public housing estates in Hong Kong. The University of Hong Kong (Pokfulam, Hong Kong).


Mayernik, D. (2013). The shape of public space: Place, space, and junk space. In G. Smith & J. Gadeyne (Eds.), Perspectives on public space in Rome, from antiquity to the present day (pp. 301–329). Aldershot: Ashgate.


The Department of Architecture educates students in an active culture of service, scholarship and invention. Uniquely situated at the crossroads of China and global influence, the Department takes the approach that design is best explored from a sophisticated understanding of both. With a multidisciplinary curriculum emphasizing technology, history and culture, students gain broad knowledge and skills in the management of the environmental, social, and aesthetic challenges of contemporary architectural practice. With opportunities for design workshops, international exchanges, and study travel, graduates of the Department of Architecture are well prepared for contribution to both international and local communities of architects and designers.